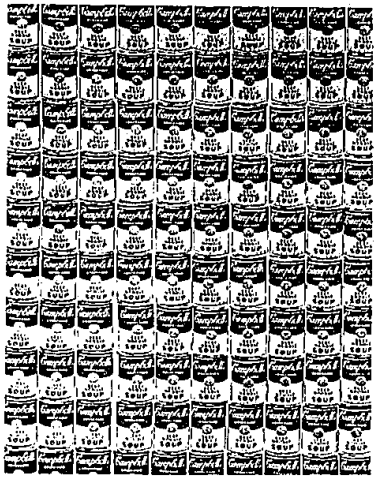
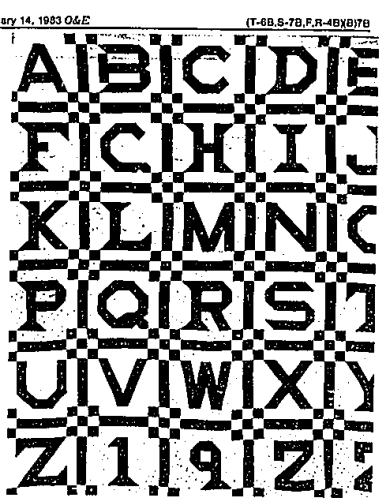


Andy Warhol's soup cans went from poster to quilt.

Quilts: There's no pattern to their popularity



The alphabet quilt reflects the quilter's interest in design and symmetry.

IT USED TO be that the only time you'd see a quilt was on a bed. But today they're at home hanging on a wall or used as a tablecloth.

From the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Hawaiian Islands, where hand-stitched quilts sport a tropical look of floral design and color, interest in — and affection for — the American quilt is as boundless as the variety of kaleidoscopic patterns that now dazzle countless aficionados and quilters alike.

The American quilt has become the Cinderella of the art world, rising in the past few years from its humble patchwork roots to places of prestige in prominent museums and art galleries. What was once considered a functional homespun craft is now often looked upon as something more, the fabric equivalent of fine paintings.

"A number of modern artists are choosing quilt-making as a medium of expression," Doris Bowman, specialist for the Smithsonian's 300-piece quilt collection, said, "It's amazing how many beautiful quilts are being made."

There's also international attention to quilts made in the United States."You can go to London, Paris, Tokyo, Milan — all have shops selling American quilts," Robert Bishop, director of the Museum of American Folk Art in New York City, said. "They're used in contemporary living as art; they rarely get to bed."

At home, the American craving for both antique and contemporary quilts, the contemporaries based on traditional patterns or stunning, innovative designs, has created a crowded calendar of fairs, craft shows, gallery exhibitions and workshops across the nation. A quilting seminar offered last spring by the Smithsonian Institution was deluged by hundreds of applications, according to Nancy Starr, manager of the Smithsonian's Selected Studies Program. Reservations to tour the quilt collection at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History are running up to three months in advance.

QUILT SALES IN country shops, city boutiques and auction houses, supplemented by sales of publications and quilting supplies, ring up a reported $50 million to $100 million annual business. At Made in America on Manhattan's posh Madison Avenue, pieced, solid and applique quilts dating back to 1845 sell briskly at prices starting at $300 and climbing to $4,000. Owner Margie Dyer cites equal interest among men and women, and about as many customers buy quilts for decorative purposes as for cozy comfort.

In Athens, Ohio, Quilt National '83 is set for June 5-July 5. The National, organized by the Dairy Barn Southeastern Ohio Cultural Arts Center, is a juried exhibition of contemporary quilts, requiring that entries be "original, not a copy of traditional designs" though "original interpretations" of old patterns are acceptable.

"Contemporary work has just taken off," National organizer Pam Parker said. Last year, entrants came from 36 states and five foreign countries. Although most of the participants are young, the older generation also is taking up the new approaches.

Not all quilt enthusiasts are turned on by the same things, a fact that accounts for quilting's large, diverse following.

"People look at quilts in two ways," Bishop said. There are those who are interested in the graphic design of the material and relate to art world images, particularly modern geometric abstractions, minimal, op and even pop, all of which, ironically, the Amish quilters of Pennsylvania anticipated a century earlier in their boldly dramatic designs.

A second group, usually older women, likes to look at quilts from the perspective of craftsmanship. "They are concerned with such things as the number of stitches per square inch," Bish said. "There's not much crossover between these two groups."

WHY QUILTS? The quilt mania is traced to the Whitney Museum's 1971 show of quilts. The show focused on the visual look of pieced quilts, recognizing the pattens as part of the American design tradition. "The art world realized that quilts were art," Dyer said.

Tradition and today's interest in handmade items seem to be other major factors. Quilts are tangible, useful and handsome links to both past and future generations.

"We Americans are now taking pride in our own art forms," said Polly Brooks, a partner in Appalachian Spring, a shop in Washington, D.C. She recalled that when her store opened in 1968 that "you couldn't have sold a quilt to a man for his office for anything." Now they are being snapped up by doctors, lawyers and architects as office art. "They give warmth and texture to a room," she said.

Applachian Spring, like other stores, sells traditional quilts made by rural women from around the nation. "We find that these ladies create fine quilts as long as they are left to themselves," Brooks said. "There's no joy for them when we dictate, and we had to stop that. When I open a shipment, I don't know what is coming out."

But the quilts that are part of the old rural lifestyle are fast disappearing along with that way of living. "The quilt is going to evolve into something different," Brooks said.

In some ways, they already have. Quilts have been, and still are, just simple "fabric sandwiches" composed of a top layer, an inner filling and a bottom layer, all quilted or stitched together to keep the filling from shifting. But contemporary quilts resemble older patterns about at much as cars of the 1980s look like carriages.

PATTERN NAMES, often as colorful as the quilts themselves, reveal the changes. Pine Tree, Old Maid's Ramble, Pickle Dish and Hearts and Gizzards belong to an earlier age, while Litho Quilt, Rythmetron and #1 resound of today. The modern designs, the Smithsonian's Nancy Starr said, are "gaspingly beautiful" in their paradoxical use of "painful color combinations."

"Though there still is strong interest in traditional quilting, modern technology has caught up with the form," said Lloyd Herman, director of the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, a national showcase for design, crafts and decorative arts. Artists have turned to such non-traditional quilting materials as plastic, beads, laminated mylar, paper, and in one case, gum wrappers. Rubber stamps, photo copy machines and silkscreens — all are being used now for printing both traditional and newer quilt materials. But one "quilt" made of stained glass was rejected by Quilt National. "We didn't want to handle it," Pam Parker said with a laugh.

Like so many other aspects of American life, American quilts are subjects of controversy. Debate simmers over whether there have been and are strong regional differences in the quilt world and whether earlier Americans realized that their handiwork had artistic value.

One viewpoint, held by Margie Dyer, suggests that for all practical purposes, there was little difference in quilts made in one part of the country and another. After all, Dyer said, as settlers moved across the country in the 19th century, quilt patterns traveled with them, creating the fabric version of the old melting pot idea. "Amish quilts do look different," she agreed. "But an applique quilt made in upper New York state looks similar to those created in southern Illinois. Pine Tree patterns are similar in Maine, New York and the West."

Polly Brooks said she feels that geographical variances once were distinct, but that was long before the age of jet travel and push-button phoning. Elaborate, fancy quilts were made in colonial times along the southern Atlantic Coast, she said, because women there had access to imported fabrics arriving at seacoast ports. In Ohio and other interior areas, the settlers had to make do with scraps, and their quilts were more haphazard.

> ***Pattern names, often as colorful as the quilts themselves, reveal the changes. Pine Tree, Old Maid's Ramble, Pickle Dish and Hearts and Gizzards belong to an earlier age, while Litho Quilt, Rythmetron and #1 resound of today.***

Were earlier generations aware that they were turning out something of artisitc value? One school holds that theirs was a naive approach, basically utilitarian. But quilt authority Jonathan Holstein said he feels the early craftswomen knew exactly waht they were creating: "Always it was planned, and with rare exceptions, planned completely."

And Bishop thinks these women did view their quilts as works of art. "These often were the only beautiful things in a house. It was grim and dingy, dark and cold. Quilts were a spot of beauty."

— David Maxfield
of the Smithsonian News Service

Quilt calendar

- The Smithsonian's Division of Textiles has published a set of instructions covering the care of antique cotton, linen and silk quilts. Detailed instructions, which discuss fabric identification, cleaning meathods and storage directions, may be obtained by writing: Division of Textiles, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. 20560.

- A quilting seminar will be offered by the Smithsonian Institution May 15-20. For information, write to Selected Studies Program, A&I 1190A, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. 20560 or call (202) 357-2475.
- The exhibition, "Kentucky Quilts," sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, will not come to the Detroit area. The closest showing will be at the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio. It will be there Oct. 1 to Nov. 6.

These women from Patrick County, N.C., are working on a traditional quilt design.

The traditional schoolhouse goes modern in this quilt.

Except for Amish quilts, traditional quilts can't be identified by region on design alone, quilt researchers say.